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Mark O. Hatfield's Legacy: He Called the Interns

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In the spring of 1989, Chris Maier began as an intern in the U.S. Capitol office of Senator Mark Hatfield. A native Oregonian, Maier had just graduated from the University of Oregon. From his first days in the U.S. Senate, Hatfield's office was a popular destination for interns and college students. Early on, that was due largely to his opposition to the Vietnam War. But over time, Maier would learn that young people flocked to Hatfield because of the opportunities he provided to his staff and interns – and the way he ran his office like a classroom.

In fact, the people who know Sen. Hatfield best say that in virtually everything he did over the course of a public career spanning 45 years, he viewed himself as a teacher and a professor. He often used his access to public figures and his position to play an educational role.

Maier and four fellow interns were working upstairs in Hatfield's office one day when the front desk called and summoned them to "The Lincoln Room." This was a conference room where staff would meet to be briefed on issues or hear from the Senator about constituent visits in Oregon. At times, Hatfield would call everyone together for a mystery guest, a public official or other notable visitor, whom he would ask to address his staff. The staff viewed the Lincoln Room as a classroom, and Sen. Hatfield was the professor.

That day, the five interns were the first to arrive in the room. They were not there for long before Sen. Hatfield walked in with Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Conner. The first female member of the nation’s highest court was visiting and wanted to see Hatfield’s collection of Abraham Lincoln memorabilia, which was proudly on display in the conference room. The collection included, among other things, a one-of-a-kind photograph of Lincoln at Gettysburg, hand casts of the president, and a unique Salvador Dali painting of Lincoln. Hatfield thought the interns would appreciate the opportunity to view it as well, and to meet Justice O’Conner.

Sen. Hatfield bookended his political career with work as a professor. After earning a Master’s degree in political science from Stanford University, he returned to his alma mater, Willamette University, to teach political science and serve as the Dean of Men. This was his profession when first elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1951. As governor, he signed legislation in 1959 creating the Oregon community college system. Upon retiring from the U.S. Senate in January of 1997, Hatfield returned to the classroom, teaching at Portland State and George Fox, and lecturing at Willamette and Lewis & Clark.

In between those professorial stints, during his 30 years of service in the U.S. Senate, Hatfield never lost that passion for teaching students. He enjoyed visiting college and high school campuses and speaking to students. Hatfield even thought of his town hall meetings, or field hearings held across Oregon, as opportunities to teach residents about important issues and how government operates.

Sean O’Holleran, a former staff member and now the senior vice president for Government and Public Affairs at Nike, once asked the Senator what position, of all he had held, was his favorite. Hatfield said “professor” and from that day forward O’Holleran would call him by that title. So, it is perhaps of little surprise that on that day in 1989, when Justice O’Conner stopped by to see the Lincoln Room, Senator Hatfield did not invite his legislative director or key judicial staff person.

He called the interns.